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ABSTRACT

Employment opportunities for history majors are discussed. The author contends that historians have been brainwashed into believing that they are fit only to be college professors. However, the practice of history academic setting (public history) involves management of industrial corporations, formulation of public policy, and the preservation of cultural resources. Sources of employment include government, business, museums, archives, libraries, newspapers, and broadcasting organizations. The need exists to articulate clearly to government and corporate leaders the value of an education in history. The historian should stress skills developed in history courses: the ability to know where to find information, to absorb large quantities of information quickly, to appreciate a variety of viewpoints, to communicate clearly, and to meet deadlines. One should also consider whether to major exclusively in history or to earn a master's degree in history and one in some other field such as archival work, conservation science, or business administration. The conclusion is that the history major must be flexible and creative in seeking a career. (Author/KC)

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CAREER COUNSELLING

THE GRADUATE HISTORY MAJOR*

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*This paper was delivered at the twenty-third annual meeting of the Missouri Valley History Conference in Omaha, Nebraska, March 7, 1980.

I have some good news and some bad news! The good news is that there is a future in history for hundreds of today's present history students. The bad news is that you will be among the fortunate only if you are creative about, not only the history you write, but also your own life as a historian.

There is a problem that all of us in history have with demographics. The baby boom, which brought us out of the market place and into the warm womb of academia is over. The baby boom is now a bust. There are more good people than good jobs.

Many in the profession are beginning to discover the possibilities of "non-traditional" or "non-academic careers" or "alternative careers" for historians. Suddenly historians are finding that they are needed in the fields of museum work, archives, preservation, and even in the business world.

To begin, let us look at the terms we just used. Historians who teach should be called "academic historians," which is what they are, and "traditional historians" should refer to all other historians who are employed as historians. The latter term is proper because the historian as a teacher is a recent (late Middle Ages) innovation, and the historian as government chronicler, researcher, collector, preserver, and writer has traditional role models dating back more than two millennia to the time of Caesar.[1]

Settling what to call ourselves would be an initial step toward solving one of the major problems of the historical profession today. That problem is not a job crisis, but instead an identity crisis. So much of graduate history training is directed toward the production

of history professors, and yet the need for such is diminishing and at the same time hundreds of historians are employed as historians outside of academia. Would not it be ridiculous for law schools to be concerned only with producing law professors?[2]

As Richard G. Hewlett, Chief Historian, Historian's Office, U.S. Department of Energy, has pointed out, historians expend much time and energy worrying about alternative career opportunities. What is it about the structure of our profession that makes this necessary? Again, consider the legal profession. Has anyone ever heard of lawyers talking about the need for alternative careers? Why is it that lawyers, as well as physicians, economists, scientists and other professionals can adapt their skills to the needs of academia, or corporations, or governments, and historians find much difficulty in doing so? All of this says volumes about the state of the profession today and our academic training programs.[3]

David A. Clary, one of the leading spokesmen for the need of historians to pull their heads out of the academic sandpile, and for several years the head of the History Section at the Forest Service, stated the problem of the historian's "job crisis" rather sincinctly in an address at the 1978 Public Studies Program at Santa Barbara. He said: "In refusing to respond to the needs of the real world beyond the specialized circles of their discipline, historians not only acquiesce in the possible deterioration of our national patrimony, but may be writing their own professional epitaph. The present 'job crisis' in the profession is due not so much to an absence of need for historians, nor to an over-population of them, nor even to the vicissitudes of the economy, as it is to the fact that most

historians have been brainwashed into believing that they are fit only to be college professors. It is only the academic field, not the historical one, that is on the wane. Historians will prosper if they can but learn to work elsewhere than on sinking ships."[4]

More recently, Clary spoke on the same point. He noted: "There is a job market for historians (in industry and government), I believe a substantial one. It simply has not been developed yet, because government and industry generally do not realize that historians have something to offer - and neither do most historians. But bear in mind, . . . that there are very few jobs in government and business where historians can do much as they have in the academic world, minus the teaching - that is, pure historical research and writing . . ."[5]

There are jobs in teaching for the Ph.D. in history. But unless something is done soon, their number will continue to dwindle. One of the truely bizarre traits of our profession is that graduate history students are so often trained with only the goal of becoming clones of their mentors, and yet look at the quality of that training.

Those of us who were trained in the traditional graudate school can all remember that frightening experience of walking out of the dusty archives and into the sterile atmosphere of the classroom. At that moment, we realized that we had not been trained to be teachers. We knew little if anything about counseling, curriculum design, course planning, nor administrative techniques.[6] And we knew even less about the most important element of a college/university teacher's life today - how to form a successful union before one is fired!

We were trained to be teachers and scholars. However the teacher training was non-existant and as far as the scholarly life was concerned, we knew how to reserach esoteric topics, but how to submit articles for publication and the like was never or rarely mentioned.

But before drastic changes are made to make graduate schools better training grounds for teachers, let's look at the market for teachers.

The most recent AHA statistics are revealing. During 1979 the AHA Employment Information Bulletin advertised 534 openings. Although this was a 1.7% increase over the previous year's advertisements, last year's job listings included "more temporary, possible, and repeat announcements and the number of permanent teaching positions (had) declined from 355 to 334." Three hundred and thirty-four permanent jobs. That is approximately one-third of the number of new Ph.D.'s produced the previous year.[7] The November, 1979 Bulletin, the one published prior to the annual convention, had 17% fewer openings listed than the previous November issue.[8]

College and university history teachers must begin to counsel their students better, by advising them that there are a multitude of job possibilities for historians outside of the teaching field. The pamphlets and brochures listed in the bibliography below should be available to every history student. What they can tell the student and what we history teachers should explain is that teaching should not be considered the major leagues, with Harvard the Pittsburgh Pirates, and some small junior college, the Toranto Bluejays, and a job as a public historian merely a minor league position on Omaha's

Triple A team. As long as our profession perpetuates the image that there is some sort of pyramid of professional progress which has us all trying to scramble up the ladder of success from the "alternative career" to the small college to eventually the Pittsburgh Pirates of universities, there will be a job crisis, because there will be an identity crisis.

Public history must be better understood by all of us. Public history "is the practice of history outside an academic setting - the application of historical perceptions and techniques to something other than classroom teaching and scholarly research. History . . . can be used in the management of industrial corporations, the formation of public policy, the preservation of cultural resources. Public historians . . . can be employed in government, business, museums, archives, libraries, newspapers, or broadcasting organizations."[9]

Public historians work with architects and urban planners in the field of historical preservation, they "analyze the record of an advertising and marketing campaign, prepare a biography of a disease, assemble a climate or weather history of a wilderness area, trace the origins of a managerial policy, participate in a land-use planning team, discover why Nigeria will not buy hoe handles from American suppliers, outline the physical history of one city block, analyze the effects of a state regulation on corporate financial health, determine the past relations between commodity exports and domestic supplies and prices, recount the historic frequency of floods or wildfires in a certain area, discover why an American fried chicken chain's Hong Kong franchise went bankrupt, or trace the cultural and political history of another country's attitudes toward our own."[10]

Martin K. Gordon has noted, for instance, that while he was working as a historian at the office of the Chief of Engineers of the U.S. Army he and other historians were asked to research the origins of the Army's responsibility for the Mississippi River levee system. The levee system was becoming a major burden, and what the Army wanted to know was whether or not they had a legal responsibility, or just a traditional responsibility, for the levees.

Besides holding this position, Gordon works part time as an historical consultant to an advertising agency in Baltimore. One of the accounts the agency has is the National Guard. Before any advertisement is released, Gordon is called in to review it and certify its historical accuracy. This does not take much of his time, it justifies a nice little retainer fee, and it guarantees that the history being presented to the public is good history.[11]

Let us look more specifically at the variety of career options in the field of public history.

CAREERS FOR HISTORIANS WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The National Coordinating Committee For The Promotion of History surveyed the federal governments' agencies in 1977 and found that 125 historical units employed 800 historians. These are historians, as Richard Hewlett describes them, who function as historians at least 50% of their work time. He estimates that there are between 1000 and 2000 historians working for the federal government, but although many of them have been hired because they had the skills of a historian and those skills were needed by a particular agency, many of them do not "do history" very often. Congressional aids, for instance, may only occasionally be required to research the history

of a problem or law. Far more time is spent answering constituents requests and devising political justification for their employees' positions.[12]

Those who are hired as historians by federal agencies are those "who can provide data the managers need in order to make decision;" in essence, then, those who can apply "the general knowledge and skills of the research historian to the needs and problems of others."[13]

The future for public historians is bright in regard to the federal government, if historians are able to convince more and more agencies that adequate planning and management require the consideration of not only technical and scientific factors, but also social and institutional factors. The historian, properly trained, can make a valuable contribution to policy research regarding the latter factors. At present, however, the role of the historian in policy research is not understood by most government officials. In fact there is no agreement among government officials on an operational definition of an historian.[14]

The problem lies mostly with the historians themselves. We have failed to articulate clearly the value of history to government and/or corporate leaders. Historians develop skills during their graduate studies but frequently do not sell themselves to employers as possessors of needed skills. A future employer in government or business is not interested in the fact that a historian has written a brilliant historiographical essay on the causes of the War of 1812. But he very well might be interested in the skills one developed while writing such an essay, such as the ability to know where to find information, to absorb large quantities of information quickly, to appreciate a variety of view points, to communicate clearly both

orally and through the written word, and to meet deadlines. These skills are attractive to an employer, while the knowledge of the War of 1812 historiography probably is not.

It might be instructive to review the professional career of public historian, Richard A. Baker. Baker, a very personable individual, has constantly created within the minds of employers a feeling of a need for someone to do something and then just happens to be available to fulfill that need. A good example is the present position he holds as head of the U.S. Senate Historical Office. Armed with a MA in history and one in Library Science, some experience with various government agencies and Washington think tanks, Baker suggested at the beginning of the 1970's to Senator Mike Mansfield that given the illustrious history of the Senate, it was a shame that there was no official keeper of Senate documents. The seed grew in Mansfield's mind, and when the Senate established its Historical Office, Baker, of course, was the perfect person to head this office.[15]

When Baker left his job to go to the Senate Historical Office, there was an opening created for an historian. Where there had only been one, now there were two historians. That type of breeding, which requires a certain amount of creativity and knowledge and spunk, is just what we need.

CAREERS FOR HISTORIANS IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION

Since the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and particularly since our Bicentennial, historical preservation has become a real bull market.

The major concentrations of historians working in the historical preservation field are in the Departments of Interior and Agriculture.

But federal legislation has mandated that each state have its own Historic Preservation Office, and thus job opportunities exist on both the federal and state level, and in some communities, even on the local level.

Historians in this field work with architects, architectual historians, art historians, and archeologists. All too frequently, according to David Clary, former historian at the historical preservation-minded Forest Service, historians take a back seat to architectural and art historians. Frequently what is saved is what is significant in terms of architecture and not always in terms of social or cultural history. Historians need to be more self-assertive and creative here too.[16]

Because many federally-funded projects are required by law to be studied not only in terms of environmental impact, but also historical impact, there are opportunities for historians as consultants.

CAREERS FOR HISTORIANS IN MUSEUMS

Before WWII, museums were elitist institutions. But the present generation of museum directors have gradually transformed museums into more populist institutions, hoping to create an enriching experience, and an alternative to rigid classroom education.[17]

There are over 5500 museums in America, ranging from the Smithsonian Institution which employs hundreds, to small museums like those dedicated to the potatoe or spider. Most of the smaller museums are staffed by volunteers.

According to Jane R. Glaser, Program Manager of the Smithsonian's Office of Museum Programs and Chair of several committees of the American Association of Museums, opportunities for volunteer work

abound in museums, but opportunities for well paying positions are narrow. Museum budgets continue to grow, however, and if this trend continues the future will be brighter than the present.[18]

CAREERS FOR HISTORIANS IN ARCHIVES

Archivist are primarily concerned with the preservation and protection of public and private records and making such accessible to researchers. Historians are used as consultants in archives, helping to determine the importance of documents, in other words, what should be saved and what should be thrown out (the National Archives, for instance, saves only about 3% of the documents that agencies send to it). Historians also prepare exhibits; edit summaries of collections; and advise researchers where to look for answers to their historical questions.

Opportunities for employment are not bright presently. According to J. Samuel Walker, an education specialist at the National Arhcives, the largest employer of historian/archivists in America, the National Archives, hires only about twenty or thirty persons a year, a very small group given the number of applicants.[19] There are archives in local and state historical societies. But many of these are staffed by either part-time or volunteer workers.

OTHER CAREERS FOR PUBLIC HISTORIANS

A few historians work under research/writing contracts for government agencies, such as NASA. Those historians with good backgrounds in writing, can find jobs with publishing houses that publish historical works. Some historians, such as a group in Atlanta, Georgia, have formed corporations to produce the histories

of families, ethnic groups, civic groups, or communities that contract for such.[20]

PREPARING FOR A CAREER IN HISTORY

Communication and research skills should be (and frequently are) the major products of graduate history work. But are these skills channelled in a way necessary for employment? A history student, for instance, who is considering a career in the field of historical preservation, should be able to describe the history of physical culture items. Instead of writing a half dozen papers in graduate school that involve mostly a tracing of the history of a diplomatic principle or political movement, it would be better if that student wrote at least one paper describing the history of a building--and not what went on in the building itself. The discipline of precise writing would be learned quickly during such an assignment.

Flexibility is one of the most important qualities needed by the traditional historian. Most employers do not have dissertation length projects for historians to pursue leisurely over a long period of time. An employer is looking for a person who can accomplish on time a series of projects in a variety of areas. Some of these projects might involve team work, where an historian might work with an architect, engineer, and economist. Experience in team work is essential.

Designing an academic program in order to acquire the experience necessary to become a traditional historian is the responsibility of the student and his/her advisor. In addition to excelling in the classroom/seminar, one should seek a variety of internship experiences. Although many internships may pay little or nothing, their

advantage is that they are an investment in one's future career. They give one experience and a source of a letter of recommendation. An intern who is not satisfied with a single assignment, but seeks out a variety of tasks will be able to demonstrate his/her flexibility easily to future employers.

Whether to major exclusively in history and earn a doctorate in history, or to earn a Master's degree in history and one in some other field, such as archival work, conservation science, business administration, etc. is an important decision. Being trained to think along several channels, and not just one, such as an historian, is extrememly important to acquiring an entrance level position. Advancement beyond a certain middle level position, however, at times is dependent in part on one's holding a doctorate degree. Thus the dilemma of whether of not to pursue the doctorate exclusively. Eventually one may need it, but only after one has progressed in a career for which a doctorate is not needed initially.

The experience of one public historian may be valuable to keep in mind. John T. Greenwood, a historian with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, complained at a recent AHA meeting that "although he has a doctorate in military history, his graduate training did not fully prepare him to work as a historian with the Department of Defense.

"As a graduate student, Mr. Greenwood explained, he was rarely involved in day-to-day research using primary sources - in his case, such materials as military reports, memoranda, and logs.

"He never really learned the techniques of interviewing, he added, nor was he accustomed to meeting regular deadlines. Perhaps worst of all, Mr. Greenwood said, was his inexperience with the overwhelming volume of research that must be done to produce historical

documents for the Defense Department."[21]

A succinct description of a public historian's needs has been made by G. Wesley Johnson, the director of the public history program at Santa Barbara. He has said that public historians need training in "teamwork, meeting deadlines, and searching out primary sources."[22]

These skills are important of course, even for the history graduate who goes into teaching, given the growing popularity of interdisciplinary courses, committee work and "publish or perish" standards.

Once a field is selected, such as preservation or museum work, it is extremely important to choose the correct graduate program. Professional organizations will frequently offer valuable advise. The American Association of Museums accredits some programs and does not accredit others. They even suggest in some cases that "museum training programs are not and should not be considered the only or necessarily the best routes into the museum profession. One different but equally legitimate path is through a long-term, intensive internship, apprenticeship or work experience. Alternately, some enter the profession directly from master's or doctoral degree programs in related academic disciplines."[23]

Logically, some careers require more than just training in history. The American Association For State and Local History recommends that for the historic preservation field, in addition to a strong background in history, academic training in "engineering, economics, business administration, architecture, law,urban planning (and) geography" would be valuable.[24]

Be flexible! Be creative! Especially after your education is interrupted - it's never over! For instance, be willing to accept a

job that is not exactly what you want, but at least it is in the same agency that you want to work for. If you have a few minutes, walk over to where the "real" work is being done and offer your assistance. Get your foot into doors, even if you have to offer your services on a volunteer basis.

One could go on, but what basically is needed for each graduate student is a good advisor, and each of us who are advisors had better know our field. Our field is much broader than many of us thought. And our field can not afford for us to be turning out just our own clones.

FOOTNOTES

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   Washington, DC 20007

   -Museum News

2. American Association for State and Local History
   1400 Eighth Ave. South
   Nashville, Tennessee 37203

   -History News

   -So You've Chosen To Be A History Professional

3. AHA
   400 A. Street
   Washington, DC 20003

   -AHA Employment Information Bulletin

   -Careers For Students of History

   -Grants and Fellowships of Interest To Historians

4. Commandant of the Marine Corps
   Code HD
   Headquarters, U.S.M.C.
   Washington, DC 20380

   -The United States Marine Corps Historical Center

5. Government Printing Office
   Washington, DC 20402

   -Beyond the BA: Federal Jobs For Graduates With Advanced Degrees or Experience #006-000-01047-7

   -Guide To Federal Career Literature #006-000-01047-7

   -Opportunities Abroad For Teachers #017-080-01897-7

6. History Office
NASA Headquarters
Washington, DC 20546

-Alex Roland's A Guide To Research In NASA History

7. National Coordinating
Committee For the Promotion of History
400 A Street
Washington, DC 20003

-Directory and Survey Of Historical Offices and Programs In The Federal Government

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Washington, DC 20560

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740-748 Jackson Pl., N.W.
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